

Fuzzy (and fizzy) thinking about soda

By ACSH Staff — October 25, 2011

New York City Health Commissioner Dr. Thomas Farley [took up](#) [1] his Pouring on the Pounds campaign once again yesterday to coincide with the nation's first Food Day, which its organizers purport promotes healthy food and eating habits. Though he was [previously accused](#) [2] by his own staff members of exaggerating the adverse health effects associated with consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages (SSB), Dr. Farley chose to once more ignore the science in order to serve up his anti-soda public service announcement.

Speaking in Times Square yesterday, Dr. Farley stated that Sugary drinks are the largest single source of added sugar in the diet, and a child's risk of obesity increases with every additional daily serving of a sugary drink.

Though he makes such wide-sweeping assertions, numerous studies, including [research](#) [3] published in the *Medscape Journal of Medicine* in 2008, have concluded that there is a paucity of data confirming such an association. Nevertheless, points out ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan, anti-soda advocates use this argument to promote their agenda in the name of public health, claiming that everyone knows that soda is the main cause of the obesity problem. It's just not that simple.

As part of the new campaign, commercials over the next two months will pound that message in many times daily to advise New Yorkers of the supposed link between SSBs and obesity, describing how drinking just one 20-ounce soda a day is equivalent to eating 50 pounds of sugar per year. These commercials stoop to portraying diabetics with amputations and an obese person in cardiac arrest in order to cynically tie such dire outcomes to drinking a can of soda a day. It's unprofessional, to say the least, adds Dr. Ross.

Recent data have shown that Americans' sugar consumption has actually declined over the past few years, even as obesity rates have risen. You would think this would have deterred those who attack SSBs, ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava points out.

Taking the soda debate one step lower on the science-based scale, Dr. Kelly Brownell, a Yale University psychology professor and director of Yale's Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, accuses the soda industry of employing the same deceitful and manipulative tactics that the tobacco industry of an earlier time used to thwart communication of the very real link between smoking and a myriad of health consequences.

In an [op-ed](#) [4] for *TIME*, Dr. Brownell attempts to equate the soda industry with the bad behavior of Big Tobacco from a half-century ago. But unlike the tobacco industry, which lied and deceived the public by among many other examples suppressing evidence about the addictive nature of nicotine, nobody has demonstrated a link between SSBs and obesity with any degree of scientific validity, says Dr. Ross. Dr. Brownell is irresponsibly impugning the beverage industry by falsely

analogizing it to the bygone behavior of the tobacco industry. The effect of his end justifies the means approach is to undercut credible science.

Though Dr. Brownell is the most vocal promoter of a tax on SSBs, which he claims will help fight obesity and generate much needed revenue, he also criticizes the beverage industry for donating \$10 million to the Children s Hospital of Philadelphia for research on and prevention of childhood obesity. In fact, when the hospital tried to give some of this money to the city to fund anti-obesity programs, Dr. Brownell went so far as to applaud the mayor s decision to decline the money, on grounds that it came from the beverage makers.

ACSH s Dr. Josh Bloom adds, Now here s some interesting logic: Let s say that Philadelphia actually began taxing soda and collecting revenue (albeit indirectly) from the beverage industry. Based on the mayor s earlier stance, wouldn t the city have to give it back? Government thinking at its finest.

Furthermore, Dr. Kava points out, there s every reason to believe that the tax revenues so raised would be used for general expenses and not obesity prevention, much like the vast tobacco settlement of 1998.

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[3] <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed?term=wolfe%20dansinger%20soft%20drinks%20weight%20gain#>

[4] <http://ideas.time.com/2011/10/24/meet-big-soda-as-bad-as-big-tobacco/>